Let Us Walk through the Door
April 24, 2011
Easter Sunday

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Psalm 98
Matthew 27:62–28:10

“They left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy.”
Matthew 28: 8 (NRSV)

What shall it be? What shall we choose: to live half alive and preserve the illusions of a Good Friday world, or live fully alive the Easter truth that Christ is risen, love never dies, not with God, not even with us, and because Christ is risen we too are risen?

William Sloane Coffin
Collected Sermons: The Riverside Years

Startle us, O God, with truth so big, so glorious, words do not contain it. Startle us with love that overcomes all—even death. On this Easter morning open our eyes to see your loving, reconciling work in our world. Open our ears so we may hear your voice in the voices of others: our dear ones and those who need us. Open our hearts to a love that comes to each of us and assures us that there is nothing to fear, ever, because Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, is not dead but risen. Amen.

When you are faced with the challenge of expressing a truth for which you simply do not have words big enough, which is the preachers’ dilemma every Sunday, but particularly this one, it helps if you have a fallback position, some great music, for instance, or a poem. So here are some lines from my favorite Easter poem, “Seven Stanzas at Easter” by John Updike:

> It was not as the flowers,
> each soft spring recurrent;
> it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
> eyes of the eleven apostles:
> it was as His flesh: ours . . .
>
> Let us not mock God with metaphor,

analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages . . .

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty . . .

Let us walk through the door.

(*Collected Poems: 1953–1993*)

This truth is so big we are not quite sure what to do with it. So we do exactly what Updike warned us not to do: we make it into a metaphor. We reduce it to more manageable proportions that we can live with and manage.

Think of the metaphors: flowers, bunnies, eggs, baby chicks. I mean no criticism here, because it is all such great fun, and I have done and love it all: Easter baskets delivered by the Easter bunny, that enigmatic and peculiar creation of American market ingenuity; new clothes, colored eggs, and chocolate—lots of chocolate. What luxury: a ten-inch tall, solid chocolate bunny sitting majestically in the midst of assorted colorful jelly beans, reposing in plastic grass. Some years I was slightly disappointed to bite into the bunny and discover that it was hollow and tasted faintly like wax. And most dramatic of all, two baby chicks, cute and fluffy, sometimes (can you believe it?) dyed pink or purple or blue, placed in a cardboard box lined with newspaper and situated next to the kitchen radiator for warmth, dutifully fed and watered until they expired, probably from the shock of being died purple, in a few days. That part of the metaphor is, thanks be to God, long gone.

I was always entranced by the notion of an Easter Parade: Irving Berlin's song was played over and over on the radio:

In your Easter bonnet, with all the frills upon it,
You'll be the grandest lady in the Easter Parade.

I received a phone call on Good Friday a few years ago from a woman who hadn't been back to Chicago in decades and wanted to return one last time. Her question of me was not "What time are you preaching on Easter?" but "What time does the Easter parade start?" I gently explained that I didn't think there was an actual Easter parade any longer, but if she came to church at Fourth Presbyterian Church, she'd see some great looking people and a few brave Easter bonnets.

I'm still thinking about the Easter parade, so this year I acted decisively (or more accurately asked Barbara Cleveland to act decisively) by calling the Chicago Historical Society to see what they knew about a Chicago Easter parade here. Sure enough, they emailed us a series of newspaper clippings from a century ago, from 1896 to 1919. I learned that the Easter parade was not a parade, but the name given to the custom of dressing up in new finery and walking to church on Easter morning. There are photos of wonderfully attired men and women walking on Michigan Avenue, one of them of a huge crowd outside Fourth Presbyterian Church. A headline in the March 30, 1902, *Tribune* announced,

> Easter Parade Faces Showers
> Gorgeous Costume and Flower Display Is Threatened by Bad Weather
> Florists Reap Harvest
> Enormous Sum Spent in Chicago for Tulips, Roses

The next day the *Tribune* reported,

> Easter Brings Storms of Snow
> Heavy Flakes Driven by Gale Quickly Cover Ground in Two-Inch Mantel
> Piercing Wind Chill

I was strangely comforted by the fact of the consistently miserable Chicago weather on Easter.

> 1910 Rain Threatens Easter Bonnets
> 1913 Weather Spoils Easter Parade

So I finally got it: you are the Easter parade. Last Sunday there was an event inelegantly described as a "Candy Grab" at Soldier Field: "The Largest Candy Grab in Chicago—Free." And the day before, at Horner Park, a Doggie Easter Egg Hunt, which promised that the Easter bunny would be on hand to pose with your pooch—which must have traumatized the poor dogs.

I missed both events. The truth is that in addition to turning Easter into a huge commercial success and lots of fun, none of us is very good at appropriating or understanding Easter, because it is so profoundly unsettling. It is a little like staring directly at the sun.

Walter Brueggemann wrote recently, "The Easter preacher is always questing about for rhetoric that is generative enough to let truth beyond our control come close to our lives. "And then Walter reached out a comforting hand to the thousands of us who are in pulpits across the land, stammering and stumbling about over the right words to convey it: "The pastor is tired and must muster energy for one more rendering of the disruptive narrative,

one more act of poetic illusiveness." How does he know? The "one more time" reference set me to counting and the astonishing realization that this is my fiftieth Easter sermon, fiftieth attempt to get it right—which none of us ultimately does.

You know the story: Jesus of Nazareth, whom some of his followers are calling Christ, Messiah, is dead. After three years of teaching and healing, he came to the city of Jerusalem for the Passover and was welcomed enthusiastically and noisily by a crowd of pilgrims who ripped branches from trees and their cloaks from their backs and made a royal carpet and shouted, "Hosanna, hosanna, save us, Son of David!" It all had a predictable effect on the religious and political authorities. Rome quite simply had no more tolerance at all for public displays of patriotism and political unhappiness than Syrian and Libyan dictators do this morning, both of whom are shooting their own people. So on Thursday evening, Jesus was arrested under the cover of darkness, tried at midnight by a hastily assembled court, and the next morning brought to the governor's temporary quarters in Jerusalem for sentencing. The governor, Pontius Pilate, had little interest in the whole matter, made a few attempts to persuade the angry mob that had gathered that the prisoner was not guilty of a capital offence, but eventually gave in, imposed the death sentence, washed his hands of the whole nasty business, and ordered a cohort of soldiers to carry out the execution, which they did. The prisoner was nailed to a cross, Rome's favorite method of public execution, and after a few hours died. Only a few women from his many followers remained with him to the end.

Joseph of Arimathea claims the body and buries it in his own tomb, and rolls the large stone in place over the opening. The women, two Marys, follow along and watch the proceedings.

Now it is Saturday morning, the sabbath. Nothing is moving in Jerusalem—no work, no shops, no trading: quiet Saturday. Pilate is enjoying the silence. But here come the old men again, the same ones who insisted that the only way to resolve the crises the Galilean had stirred up was to put him to death. Pilate, exasperated, agrees to meet with them. I've always imagined them bowing, shuffling:

> "Excellency,"—obsequiously—"you may have heard that the prisoner said one time something about rising from the dead. That's silly of course, but, Excellency, what if his crazy disciples steal the body in the middle of the night and then claim that he is alive. That would make things very complicated for us—and for you, Excellency. So may we respectfully suggest that you assign a squad of soldiers to secure the tomb?"

> Pilate, clearly exasperated: “You have your own guards at the temple. Assign them the job.” And then one of the best lines in The New Testament: “Go, make it as secure as you can.”

These are frightened old men. They are afraid of something new, something that might undercut their own position of power and authority, of course. They are defenders of the status quo and their own privileged position in it. They are there to try—as we all do on occasion—to nail down the current political, social, and economic arrangement, our tax breaks, our deductions, our access to money and power, that works in our favor. But, I have always believed, more so every year, that beneath that fear for their own position, there is a much deeper, more profound fear. They’re afraid that what he said would happen, would happen: that with life in him, with God’s own breath of life in him, he’d get up and walk out of the tomb, that resolute symbol of inevitable death, and walk into a world suddenly, dramatically, magnificently new, because he is alive, not dead.

We moderns want facts, evidence, rational explanation. So some have proposed that he wasn’t really dead but in a drug-induced coma and that in the cool of the tomb he regained consciousness. Others conclude that his disciples, crushed by his execution as a common criminal, got together and made it all up, created a myth of resurrection.

That doesn’t work very well for a number of reasons, chief among them, for me, is that many of those men and woman lived and died for him, and you don’t give your life for a myth you made up yourself. I discovered an intriguing new perspective this year in the late William Placher’s new theological-biblical commentary, published after his death. Placher observes the role women play in the story. Women, he observes, were not credible witnesses in that time and place. Women were not permitted to testify in court, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus reports, because of “the levity and temerity of their sex.” Placher suggests that given the suspicion of the testimony of women, why would anybody invent a story with women as the primary, the only original, witnesses? The only plausible explanation, Bill Placher concluded, is that it happened that way (*Mark: A Theological Community,* p.246).

Saturday is over. The old men have returned to their homes, their fears mollified by a cordon of guards at the tomb. The disciples of Jesus are hiding somewhere in a secret, locked room in Jerusalem, frightened for their lives, waiting for an opportunity to head home to Galilee. Two of their number, the same two women who were there when he died on the cross on Friday and followed behind and watched as Joseph buried him in the rock tomb, those same two, before the sun was up on the first day of the new week, head back to the tomb. Matthew doesn’t speculate why, only that they came to see, the same way you go back to the cemetery the day after

the funeral one last time before you get in the car and drive across the country to home.

When they approach, things start to happen. Not all hell, but all heaven breaks loose: a violent earthquake, an angel rolls back the stone; the guards are scared to death and pass out in fear. In one of the great understatements of all time the angel says, “Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. Come, see. Go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised and is going to Galilee; there you will see him.” So they leave—with “fear and great joy.”

“Do not be afraid.” If you need a two-word summary of Christian faith, “Fear not” would be it.

It’s in the story from the beginning. When an angel accosts old Zechariah to tell him that in her old age his wife, Elizabeth, will conceive and bear a son, the first thing the angel says is “Do not be afraid, Zechariah.”

When the angel Gabriel appears to young Mary to announce that she will give birth to a son, the angel’s first words are “Do not be afraid, Mary. Fear not.”

When the child is born and angels fill the sky over the heads of terrified shepherds, an angel says, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of a great joy.”

And now, at an empty tomb, in the presence of a reality so profound, all they can do is tremble in fear: “Do not be afraid.”

There is a lot to be afraid of these days. Wars without end, unimaginable debt, global warming and a looming ecological crisis, the end of political civility and growing extremism, religious violence, guns in the streets, economic uncertainty. And beneath all fears, the primary human, existential fear of what the great philosopher-theologian Paul Tillich called “nonbeing,” death, and the constant, consistent presence of death. In a new book with the compelling title *Practice Resurrection,* Eugene Peterson writes, “Church is an appointed gathering of people who practice a life of resurrection in a world in which death gets the biggest headlines: death of nations, death of civilizations; death of marriage, death of careers, obituaries without end.”

There is plenty to be afraid of, and you and I, without ever knowing it, can begin to be captives to our fears and to live out of our fear. And to the degree that we do that, we are not fully alive.

But the word today is that death is not what it seemed to be. Because of Easter, death is no longer in charge. Because of Easter death no longer has

the last word. God does. Because of Easter we literally live in a new world where the ultimate reality is not the death of all things, including you and me; the ultimate reality in life is God and love everlasting.

The Easter word is not that God will protect you from every danger, that you and I will never encounter serious trouble, sickness, or death. The Easter word is that whatever happens to us, God will be with us, to comfort and strengthen and uphold. The Easter word is that nothing in all creation, as St. Paul put it, not sickness, not failure, not disappointment, not persecution, not even death itself, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

It ends so quietly, so beautifully: “He’s going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.” One of the most rigorous and profound thinkers of our time was Karl Barth. But about this Barth wrote simply, “The context of the Easter event was not that the disciples found the tomb empty . . . but when they had lost him through death they were sought and found by him as the Resurrected. . . . Christians do not believe in the empty tomb but the risen Christ” (See Placher, p. 244).

The headline today is “He is not dead but alive, and he is going ahead of you and me, in the days and years out in front of us. We will see him there, and when all our days and years are gone, he will find us and we will see him and greet him.”

The poet advised, “Let us not mock God with metaphor, sidestepping transcendence—let us walk through the door.”

So dear friends, walk through the door, into a new reality, a new world, in which death with all its greedy deadliness has been overcome, replaced with a love that will never die,

“Let us walk through the door”: love without reservation, love without holding back, love your dear ones and friends, love neighbors and strangers, give your life away in love.

In the full confidence of a love that will never die, a love from which even death cannot separate us, commend all your dear ones who are no longer here to God’s eternal love. Walk through the door. You are gloriously free. Fear not. Do not be afraid. Sing and laugh this day and every day, for Christ our Lord was dead but is risen and is going ahead of us into the future. There we will see him.

Christ is risen. Hallelujah.